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THE ASSAULT UPON FORMAL GRAMMAR CONSIDERED IN ITS HISTORICAL SETTING

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"No time for formal grammar. Technical grammar should not be taught in the elementary school," declares a recent writer on modern elementary school practice.¹ "Technical grammar should not have a place as a separate study," directs Doctor Frank McMurry.² "Grammar should be deferred entirely until the high-school period," recommend Strayer and the group of experts who made the Butte Survey.³ Shall we then banish grammar to the high school? In answer we have the admonition of Hall-Quest:⁴ "In high school the work in English should not be impeded by prolonged drill on grammar." We could multiply instances of the hot displeasure occasioned by the continued presence in the curriculum of this once highly esteemed subject. Apparently there is a decided, though not concerted, effort to rid the elementary school of formal grammar. At the same time there is no disposition on the part of high-school authorities to burden themselves unduly with the ill-favored study.

What is the matter with formal grammar? Not many years ago grammar shared with arithmetic the place of greatest prominence in the upper grades. The gruelling grind in grammar is thought to have brought many of us into a mastery of the mother-tongue. Not a few of us are accustomed still to think that we purified our diction upon conjugations and declensions and incidentally sharpened our wits by the self-same process. Have we lost faith in the efficacy of grammar? Have we abandoned the sacred tradition of language teaching? In this paper the writer submits

¹ Freeland, *Modern Elementary School Practice* (1919), p. 253.

² *Elementary School Standards* (1917), p. 166.

³ *Butte Survey* (1914), p. 54.

⁴ *Supervised Study* (1916), p. 222.

a few bits of documentary evidence covering a period of one hundred and twenty years. Perhaps these facts may throw light on the objections that have been raised against grammar.

The objections now being urged against the subject have been well stated by Klapper:¹

First. The old boast that grammar teaches how to write and speak the English language correctly has been disproved. "A child whose compositions leave little to be desired may score a failure in grammar, while his neighbor, well versed in the intricacies of verbal forms and the rules of agreement in grammar, may write English that is devoid of all application of this technical knowledge."

Second. In many classrooms there is little or no relation between grammar and composition.

Third. There are too much refinement of terms and too many hair-splitting distinctions.

Fourth. "Lessons are given over exclusively to reciting set classifications, stereotyped definitions, formal rules and memorized lists."

Fifth. Lack of unanimity of terminology in textbooks leads to the confusion of pupils and teachers.

Of these reasons it seems that the first is the one that has damaged the case of grammar more than any other. Mahoney, although he recommends the beginning of technical grammar in the sixth grade, advised the teacher to drill pupils on the errors that crop out in their speech, and adds: "These inaccuracies will never be corrected by relying on the lessons in formal grammar. Correct speech is not acquired in this way."²

So stated, the indictment of grammar is before us. What is likely to come of it? We may find our answer in the history of the case. How long has the indictment against grammar been pending? Is the offense of teaching language through grammar one of the recent discoveries of educational muckrakers, or is there a standing complaint against grammar which we have inherited along with the grammar itself?

If we go back to the Report of the Committee of Ten (1894) we will doubtless find the source from which many of the critics of grammar have drawn their inspiration. The Committee states its position in the following words:

¹ *Teaching of English*, (1917), p. 218.

² Mahoney, *Standards in English* (1918), pp. 109, 125.

Not earlier than the thirteenth year of the pupil's age the study of formal grammar, with drill in fundamental analysis, may be taken up. It should not be pursued as a separate study longer than is necessary to familiarize the pupil with the main principles. Probably a single year (not more than three hours a week) will be sufficient. . . .

With regard to the study of formal grammar the Conference wishes to lay stress on three points: (1) a student may be taught to speak and write good English without receiving any special instruction in formal grammar; (2) the study of formal grammar is valuable as training in thought, but has only an indirect bearing on the art of writing and speaking, and (3) the teaching of formal grammar should be as far as possible incidental and should be brought into close connection with the pupil's work in reading and composition.¹

More recent critics of the study of grammar have done little more than restate the position of the Committee of Ten. So much for the immediate antecedents of the present situation. The defection from grammar, however, did not begin with the publication of the report of this committee. It began very much earlier than that. It is closely associated with the naturalistic movement ushered in by Rousseau and Pestalozzi, and doubtless made its appearance whenever and wherever that movement began to exert itself. Rousseau stood in opposition to all formal school practices. Pestalozzi banished grammar from Burgdorf and substituted therefor his informal oral language lessons.

English grammar began its development during the seventeenth century. It made little headway, however, until after the appearance of Robert Lowth's *A Short Introduction to English Grammar* (1762), which found extensive favor in both England and America. More important than Lowth's book was Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* which appeared in 1795. For many years this was practically the only grammar used in England and America. It went through over fifty editions in the original, and an abridgment, first published in 1818, reached over 120 editions of ten thousand each. It became the standard for usage and the model for many succeeding grammars. The subject attained its logical perfection at the acme of its popularity during the nineteenth century.

Benjamin Franklin as early as 1749 recommended the study of grammar and English literature as the center for the organization

¹ *Report of Committee of Ten*, pp. 88-89.

of an academy at Philadelphia.¹ The proposal was in advance of the times and the English department of the academy which was organized (1853) did not prosper. It was not until after the Revolution that a decided demand for instruction in English began to appear.² Lindley Murray's Grammar came in response to this demand. During the first quarter of the nineteenth century grammar was introduced into the courses of study of most of the academies and in 1819 became one of the entrance requirements at Princeton.

Even at this early date there evidently was doubt as to whether grammar would answer the need for language instruction in the case of younger children. In 1798, three years after the appearance of Murray's Grammar, Doctor Benjamin Rush, distinguished physician, member of the faculty of the University of Pennsylvania, and writer upon various social and literary subjects, published an essay entitled, *Observations upon the study of the Latin and Greek Languages, as a Branch of a Liberal Education, with Hints of a plan of liberal instruction, without them, accommodated to the Present State of Society, Manners and Government in the United States*. Following in the tracks of his friend Franklin, Doctor Rush recommended the substitution of an English core for the classical core in the course of study. His observations upon the study of grammar have a modern ring after the strain of many such observations by latter-day educational writers. It is interesting to read what he has to say:

Let the first eight years of a boy's time be employed in learning to speak, spell, to read, and write the English language. For this purpose let him be entrusted to the care of a master who speaks correctly at all times, and let the books he reads be written in a simple and correct style. During these years, let not an English grammar by any means be put into his hands. It is to most boys, under even twelve years of age, an unintelligible book. As well might we contend that a boy should be taught the names and number of the humours of the eye, or the muscles of the tongue, in order to see or to speak, as be taught the English language by means of grammar. Sancho, in attempting to learn to read by chewing up the letters of the alphabet, did not exhibit a greater absurdity than the boy of seven or eight years of age does in committing grammar rules to memory, in order to understand the English language. . . .

¹ Proposals relating to the education of youth in Pennsylvania and sketch of an English school.

² Brown, *Making of Our Middle Schools*, p. 234.

I affirm that the construction of our language should be learned by a careful attention to the places and uses of the different parts of speech in ageable compositions, and not by contemplating them in a disjointed state in an English grammar. . . . I do not mean by anything that has been advanced to insinuate that our pupil should not be instructed in the principles and laws of our language. I have reserved this part of knowledge to a much later period of his youth at which time he will acquire it almost as soon as Molière's "Citizen turned Gentleman" learned to distinguish between prose and poetry. He will find that he is in possession of this knowledge, and that the business of his master will be only to give names to things with which he is already acquainted.¹

It will be noted that the publication of this essay came three years after the publication of Murray's work. Rush was doubtless familiar with the new grammar, for he and Murray were both residents of Philadelphia. But the point to be emphasized is that Rush's criticism appeared just at the time grammar began to come into vogue in America. The criticism of grammar as a means of acquiring a mastery of the mother-tongue is therefore almost as old as the subject itself.

It would be interesting to discover the source of Rush's ideas. I do not have available data for pursuing the matter very far. The Doctor's method of teaching language falls in line pretty well with the teachings of Rousseau, and we know that he quotes Rousseau in some of his other essays. He could not have been subject to the Pestalozzian influence because Pestalozzi did not begin his work at Burgdorf until 1799. We may attribute a great deal to the originality of Dr. Rush, for his essays indicate that he was a bold and independent thinker.

There is something in the foregoing quotation that reminds one of Herbert Spencer, and this suggests that Spencer expressed himself upon the subject of grammar in very much the same way. In the essay on *Intellectual Education* (1861) we find his attitude set forth:

From the substitution of principles for rules, and the necessary co-ordinate practice of leaving abstractions untaught until the mind has been familiarized with the facts from which they are abstracted, has resulted the postponement of some once early studies to a late period. This is exemplified in the intensely

¹ Rush, *Essays, Literary, Moral, and Philosophical*, collected and republished 1806; Preface dated January 9, 1798.

stupid custom, the teaching of grammar to children. . . . In following the process of nature, neither individuals nor nations ever arrive at the science *first*. A language is spoken, and poetry is written, many years before either a grammar or prosody is even thought of. Men did not wait till Aristotle had constructed his logic, or reason. In short, as grammar was made after language so it ought to be taught after language. . . .

In the first sentence of this quotation Spencer uses the past tense, implying that the schools of that day had already begun to postpone the teaching of grammar until a later period in the life of the pupil. He is doubtless referring to the practice of the Pestalozzians who at that date (1860) were particularly active in the promotion of oral language lessons. Cubberley claims, not without reason, that the introduction of oral and written language study by the Pestalozzians in America "tended to replace the former great emphasis upon English grammar in the upper grades."¹

In the literature of the period between 1860 and 1875 it is evident that there was considerable agitation of the question of language study. In recommending a course of study to the Board of Education of New York City in 1867 Dr. Lathrop wrote as follows:

There is just now, among a certain class of educational writers, a decided disposition to disparage the study of grammar. They speak of it as lumber—useless stuff, as the means of the "artificial production of stupidity." They find that the pupils who have the benefit of some grammatical lessons do, nevertheless, commit errors in the use of language, and do not always speak and write English with Addisonian elegance, and so they condemn grammar altogether. . . . Many things which have been unskilfully and unseasonably taught as grammar justly deserve censure, but grammar skilfully and seasonably taught is, in my humble judgment, an indispensable branch of elementary education.²

Dr. Lathrop recommended that grammar be begun in the fifth or sixth year. According to Barnard's Report on the Schools of the District of Columbia, just prior to the publication of the report some cities were beginning grammar in the fifth year and others were postponing it as late as the seventh year.³ Boston began the

¹ *Education in the United States*, pp. 299-300.

² Barnard, *Special Report on Schools of District of Columbia*, (1871), p. 480.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 474-570; data for school year 1866-67.

study in the fifth year; New Haven, New York, Cincinnati, St. Louis, and Louisville began it in the sixth year; New Bedford, Springfield, and Chicago did not take it up until the seventh year. In cases where grammar was postponed until the seventh year it was generally preceded by extensive language training in the lower grades. A description of the language course in Chicago (1866-67) indicates that the more formal aspects were not emphasized there even in the seventh year:

The textbook is introduced into this grade [seventh] for the first time. It is not desirable that all the critical observations pertaining to the science should be studied by the pupils, at least not until a later period, when the whole subject is reviewed. Practice is worth more than precept in this study. Hence illustrative exercises of the rules given, especially in connection with the errors noticed in every-day conversation of the children, will be of great value.¹

That the relative importance of language lessons and grammar was a question of considerable concern fifty years ago the reports of the National Education Association give evidence. The question was discussed at the meetings in 1874, 1875, 1877,² and was then practically laid away until the Committee of Ten gave its report in 1894. In the discussions that followed the reading of papers on the subject the devotees of language training are found arrayed against the conservative advocates of formal grammar. The former were usually favored in the argument. A paper presented in 1874 by a Cleveland teacher is somewhat caustic in its criticism of grammar:

Strange as it may seem, there certainly exists a firm impression in the public mind that English grammar teaches the art of speaking and writing the English language correctly. Grammarians themselves have somewhat encouraged that view. But we know that it is all a mistake. English grammar does nothing of the kind. It teaches the art of finding out whether other people speak or write the English language correctly, but its assistance toward our attaining that desirable result is exceedingly apocryphal.

The language-study movement of the middle of the nineteenth century is an outcropping of the Pestalozzian movement in America. Oral object lessons found a place in the lower grades and probably displaced elementary grammar in some schools. What the net

¹ Barnard, *op. cit.*, p. 568.

² *N.E.A. Proceedings*, (1874), p. 264; (1875), p. 153; (1877), p. 175.

result was it is hard to estimate. Grammar continued in the three upper grades, and in many schools its place in these grades is still undisputed.

Formal grammar, as we have learned from the foregoing historical review, seems to have labored, ever since the attainment of its logical organization under Lindley Murray, against the criticism of the natural or inductive thinkers. The gist of the criticism of Rush in 1798 and of Spencer in 1861 is to this effect. A notable tendency of the present is not so much toward the elimination of formal grammar as a school subject, but toward the reorganization of the study along inductive lines. Chubb in 1902 suggested such a reorganization:

If our study is to be for the most part inductive, this principle must perforce be observed. And that it should be inductive, it is hardly necessary to prove. Let the child understand that he has many of the data of the science of grammar from which the conclusions of the grammarians are drawn. We shall not begin with definitions—we shall evolve definitions. The teacher's business will be to guard against hasty conclusions; to warn the pupil when he has not all the facts material to a conclusion. The text-book will be used chiefly for suggestion and verification.¹

Kennedy (1915) raises his voice in the approval of such a step:

Grammar should be begun as every other science is begun—with the facts. There are language facts with which the child should begin as there are facts in every other field. The proper method here as elsewhere is to have the children gather and examine these language facts, classify them carefully, and then proceed by inference and induction.²

Another reform looking toward making the subject more practical is being promoted at the present time. This has to do with the abbreviation of the course by the elimination of language classifications that do not have a place in the speech of the child, and by concentrating attention upon forms of most frequent use. Words are to be classified according to their function in sentences. Klapper and Mahoney belong to this school.³ The National Joint Committee on English, under the chairmanship of J. F. Hosis, throws a powerful influence in favor of this view. Dr. Hosis expresses the attitude of the committee:

¹ Chubb, *Teaching of English*, p. 221.

² Kennedy, *Fundamentals in Method*, p. 152.

³ Klapper, *The Teaching of English*, pp. 244, 262.

A sane attitude toward the teaching of grammar would seem to be to find out what parts and aspects of the subject have actual value to children in enabling them to improve their speaking, writing, and reading, to teach those parts according to modern scientific methods, and to ignore any and all portions of the conventional school grammar that fall outside these categories. In general, the grammar worth teaching is the grammar of use—function in the sentence—and the grammar to be passed over is the grammar of classification—pigeon-holing by definition. . . . Children should be set to examining only those grammatical forms and constructions whose use they can plainly see, and they should pursue such examination with the conscious purpose of learning how to make better sentences.¹

Such reforms in the organization of grammar and in the method of presenting it as those now being proposed represent an effort to remedy defects that have called forth criticism for more than a century. It has been known for years that grammar did not appeal to the interest of the pupils and that it accomplished little in the improvement of their speech. The conclusion formerly reached has been that their minds were too immature to grasp it, and that grammar in consequence should either be eliminated or be postponed to a later period in school life. Judging the future by the past grammar, as a school subject, is here to stay; but there is no reason why it may not be reorganized and made more teachable. The language work of the grades should culminate in grammar, but the grammar should be in such a form that the pupils will recognize the sequence and bring their past experience in language to their aid in understanding the subject.

¹ *U.S. Bureau of Education Bull. No. 17* (1917), p. 37.